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Analytical Services Group

Crown Court Bulletin

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Provisional Figures

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This bulletin provides information on throughput at Crown Courts in Northern Ireland during the period October to December 2015 and commentary on trends observed for this quarter in each year from 2007. During the period October to December 2015:
- **The introduction of new rules in May 2015 in relation to legal aid remuneration resulted in a number of solicitors and counsel withdrawing their representation from a range of court cases. This has affected defendants' access to legal aid representation and this may have had an impact on disposals and delay within the Crown Court process during the period.**
- There were 345 Crown cases received during October to December 2015 (Table 1). This was a 14% decrease on the 403 received during October to December 2014. The number of cases disposed has decreased by 59% from 402 during October to December 2014, to 165 for the same period in 2015 (Table 2). The number of cases received and disposed for the October to December quarter over the last nine years is outlined in Figure 1.
- There were 445 defendants received in the Crown Court during October to December 2015 (a 12% decrease on same period last year, when 508 defendants were received). 205 defendants were disposed during October to December 2015 (a decrease of 60% against the same period last year, when 507 defendants were dealt with).
- The average time from committal to hearing for October to December 2015 was 176 days, compared with 111 days for the same period in 2014. The average time from conviction to disposal was 88 days, compared with 48 days for the equivalent period in 2014. The average waiting times for defendants disposed in the October to December quarter over the last nine years is outlined in Figure 2.
- County Court Judges disposed of 97% of defendants (199) similar to the same quarter last year they disposed of 99% (501) defendants. 20% of defendants were charged solely with offences against the person while 32% of defendants had a combination of charges. During the same period last year 15% of defendants were charged solely with offences against the person, and 42% of defendants had a combination of charges. The charge types for defendants disposed during October to December 2015, are outlined in Figure 3.
- Of the 205 defendants disposed during October to December 2015, 60 (29%) pleaded guilty to all charges, compared with 175 (35%) during October to December 2014.
- In total there were 609 Crown Court sittings for October to December 2015 compared with 702 for October to December 2014 (a decrease of 13%), with a total time of 1339 hours sat compared with 1923 hours sat during the same period last year.

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INTRODUCTION

The Crown Court has exclusive jurisdiction to try offences charged on indictment. Offences tried on indictment are more serious offences. The Lord Chief Justice is President of the Crown Court and the Lords Justices of Appeal, High Court Judges and county court judges all sit in the Crown Court.

Trial on indictment in the Crown Court follows after the accused has been returned for trial at committal proceedings in a magistrates' court. The Public Prosecution Service is responsible for preparing a formal document called an indictment, stating the charges which the accused will face. The matters are then tried before a judge sitting with a jury.

The Crown Court normally sits at seven different venues throughout Northern Ireland and the trial of non-scheduled offences takes place at the sitting of the Crown Court determined by the District Judge who committed the accused. This is usually the Crown Court acting for the county court division in which the offence is alleged to have been committed.

Appeal from the Crown Court is to the Court of Appeal. If a person wishes to appeal against conviction on a question of fact, the permission of either the Crown Court Judge or the Court of Appeal is required. To appeal against sentence he or she needs the leave of the Court of Appeal.

All persons convicted of a scheduled offence tried on indictment can appeal against conviction to the Court of Appeal on any grounds and without leave. This automatic right of appeal is a safeguard built into the system because in these cases there is no jury.

The prosecution has no right to appeal against the acquittal of a defendant who has been tried on indictment. The Attorney-General can refer a point of law to the Court of Appeal for its opinion, but even if the Court of Appeal considers that the trial judge made an error of law resulting in an acquittal, the acquittal still stands. The reference and subsequent ruling is useful in guiding the prosecution of future trials.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Data sources

Data contained in the Tables are inputted onto the Integrated Court operations System (ICOS). This system was implemented across the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) over a two year period from 2005 to 2007. While ICOS was introduced in the Crown Court during 2006, data derived from ICOS has been used as the source for official government statistics since 2007, when the implementation of ICOS across all court tiers was completed. ICOS is a live operating system used in each court tier to process every part of court business, from receipt of payments through to the production of final orders made. The data are input into this system on a daily basis by court clerks, and this information is checked and confirmed by another member of staff to ensure the data entries are correct. As data on licence applications received and disposed are not recorded on ICOS, these data are compiled manually by each county court office and submitted on a quarterly basis.

2.2 Methodology for generating data

Statisticians based within the NICTS take a download of Crown Court information from ICOS on a monthly basis. The information is downloaded using a package called Oracle Discoverer which extracts all the relevant data from ICOS into text files which are refreshed with up to date information each weekend. The text files are downloaded onto a secure internal facility that only specified statistical personnel have access to. The data contained in the files are identified only by numbers and names and addresses are not held. These statistical files are not transmitted outside the NICTS statistical team. The statisticians based in the NICTS then import these data into the Statistics Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). SPSS is then used to perform extensive data validations to identify potential errors in the data and to ensure the data are reliable and robust.

2.3 Baseline and Time period

Data contained within this bulletin relate to the time series 2007, when ICOS was adopted as the source of Crown Court data, to the current calendar year 2015.

2.4 Data quality and validation

Statisticians based in the NICTS have invested significant time and effort creating an extensive computer programme within SPSS to validate the information downloaded from ICOS. The programme includes over 100 checks against downloaded Crown Court data to: (i) check consistency over time and between variables; (ii) reliability of data using logic checks; (iii) checking that variables fall within accepted ranges; and (iv) checking with the ICOS Support Team in the event of any major discrepancies that have occurred since the last download. The validation program produces user friendly tables highlighting the potential problems which are circulated to each county court venue as a validation report.

Each court division has a Case Progression Officer who is responsible for: monitoring accuracy levels on ICOS, by carrying out sample checks on data entry and court resulting;

ensuring all validations on ICOS and manual statistics returns are completed in a timely manner; providing advice and identifying training needs; monitoring the confirmation of ICOS criminal court resulting, including the inputting of adjournment codes; and promoting awareness of the impact error can have, its wide ranging consequences and the negative impact on the reliability of management information.

The Case Progression Officer is given a two week period from the date the validation report issues until all records are amended on ICOS. This ensures that the corrections are updated before the next download of files. After the files have been refreshed each weekend, all the data are then downloaded again, with the new download reflecting amendments made as a result of the validation reports. If any errors have not been corrected, they will continue to appear in the validation reports until the necessary amendments are made on ICOS.

The NICTS statistics team then ensure that all validations relating to the reporting period are amended prior to publication. Once these amendments have been checked, SPSS syntax programming is then used to generate the tables in the publication.

2.5 Counting rules

Receipts are counted from the date the case is committed to the Crown Court from the Magistrates court. Disposals are counted from the result date that a final order was made against the case changing the case status to dealt with.

2.6 Interpreting trends

Care should be taken when comparing data trends before and after 2007, when ICOS was introduced as the source for Crown Court data. For further advice on differences in data between years, please contact the statistician responsible for this bulletin.

2.7 Revisions

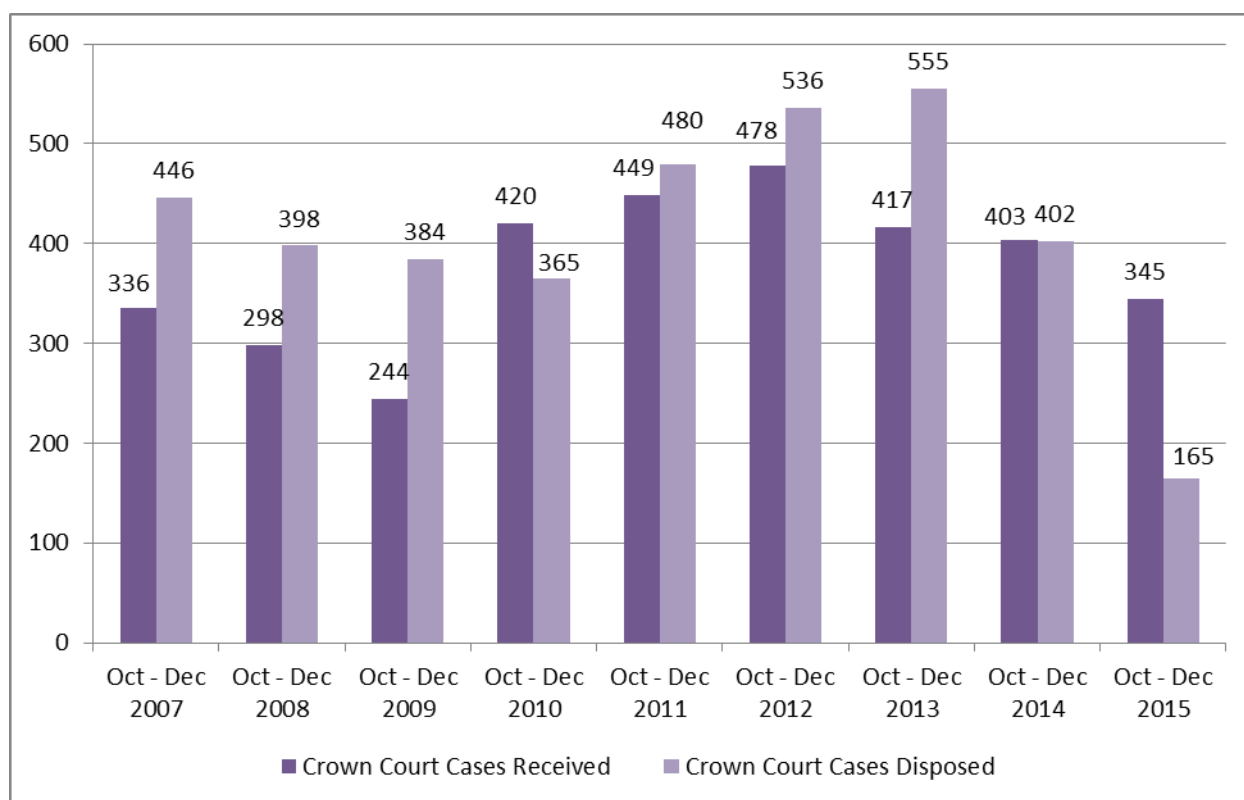
Any revision to data will be applied in light of the ASG (NICTS) Statistical Note 'Policy Statement on Revisions' which can be found on the Statistics and Research page of the Services section on the NICTS website (www.courtsni.gov.uk). Incorrect figures or changes to this publication will be published on the web in a formal Statistical Notice.

3 FINDINGS

3.1 Receipts & Disposals

There were 345 Crown cases received during October to December 2015 (Table 1). This was a 14% decrease on the 403 received during October to December 2014. The number of cases disposed has decreased by 59% from 402 during October to December 2014, to 165 for the same period in 2015 (Table 2). The number of cases received and disposed for the October to December quarter over the last nine years is outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Crown Court Cases Received and Disposed: October - December 2007 to October - December 2015



The trend in Crown Court cases received in the October to December quarter fluctuated between 2007 and 2015, peaking at 478 in 2012. The trend in cases disposed also fluctuated between 2007 and 2015, peaking at 555 in 2013 before decreasing by 28% in 2014 and a further 59% in 2015.

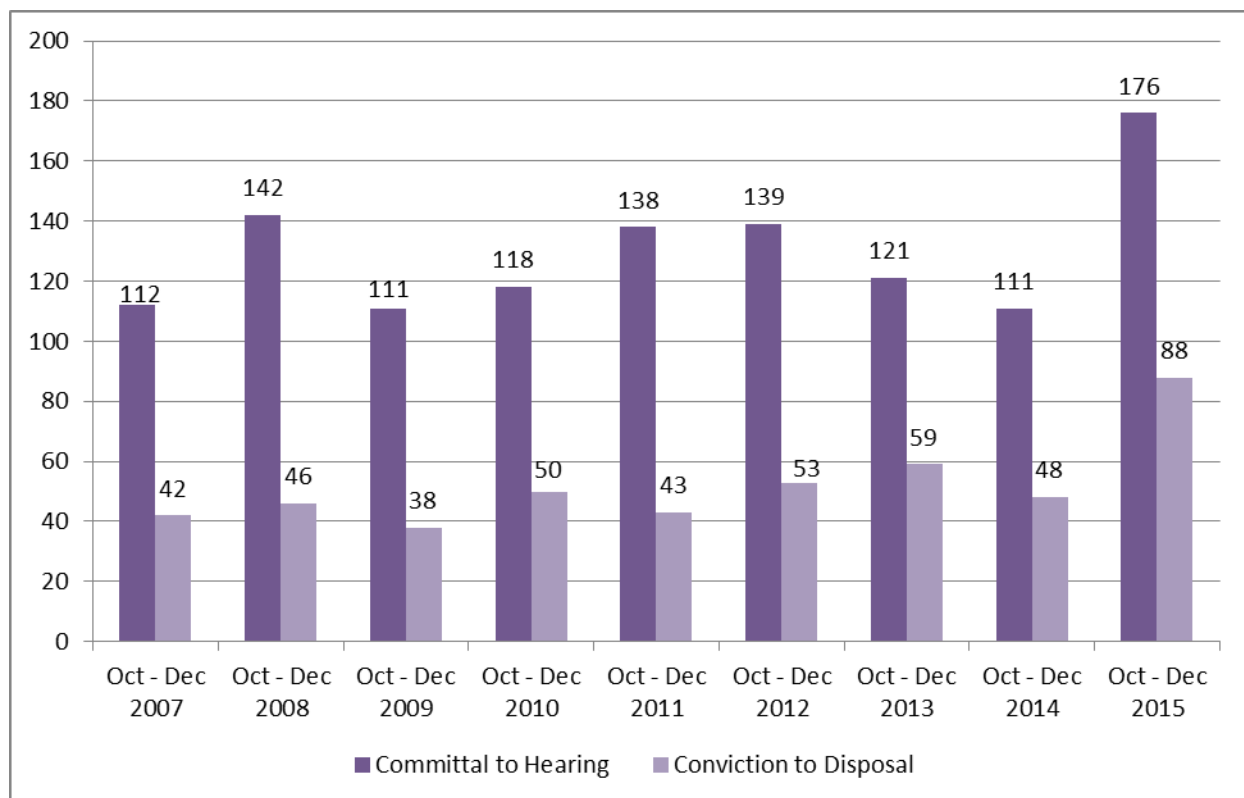
There were 445 defendants received in the Crown Court during October to December 2015 (a decrease of 12% compared to the same period last year, when 508 defendants were received). 205 defendants were disposed during October to December 2015 (a decrease of 60% against the same period last year, when 507 defendants were dealt with). The

trend in defendants received and disposed fluctuated between 2007 and 2015 with receipts peaking in 2012 and disposals peaking in 2013, before decreasing in 2014 and again in 2015. (Tables 3 and 4).

3.2 Waiting times

The average time from committal to hearing for October to December 2015 was 176 days, compared with 111 days for the same period in 2014. The average time from conviction to disposal was 88 days, compared with 48 days for the equivalent period in 2014. Average waiting times from committal to hearing have fluctuated over the last nine years peaking in 2015 at 176 days (Figure 2). The average waiting times for the October to December quarter from conviction to disposal have remained relatively stable between 2007 and 2014, before increasing by 59% in 2015.

Figure 2: Crown Court waiting times in days: October - December 2007 to October - December 2015



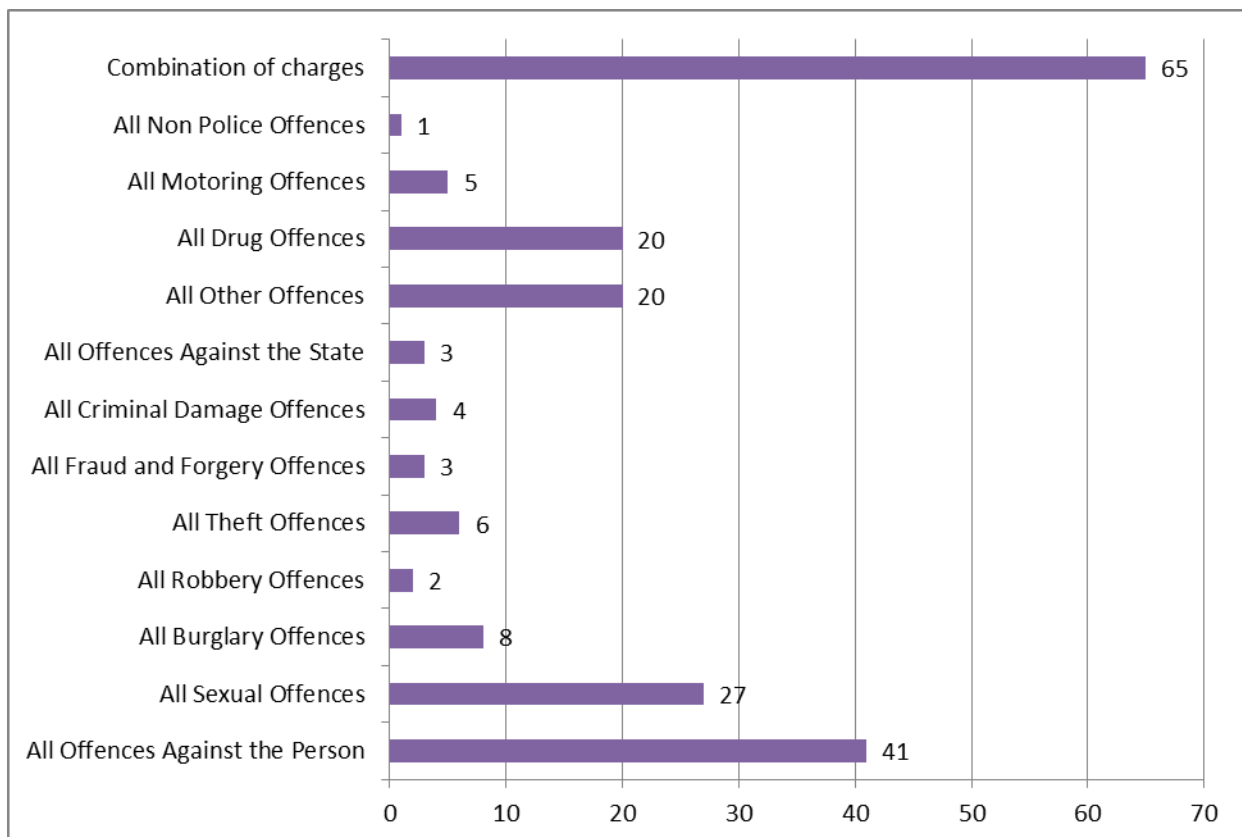
3.3 Disposals by Judge Type

County Court Judges disposed of 97% of defendants (199) and during the same quarter last year they also disposed of 99% (501) defendants. The percentage of defendants disposed of by County Court Judges has remained relatively stable over the time series, ranging between 91% and 99%.

3.4 Disposals by Charge Type

Between October to December 2015, 20% of defendants were charged solely with offences against the person while 32% of defendants had a combination of charges (Figure 3). During the same period last year 15% of defendants were charged solely with offences against the person, and 42% of defendants had a combination of charges. Throughout the time series the majority of defendants disposed of each year have been charged with a combination of offences. Defendants charged solely with offences against the person account for the next largest offence category, ranging from 10% to 20% for the October to December quarter between 2007 and 2015.

Figure 3: Crown Court defendants disposed by charge type: October - December 2015



3.5 Outcome of Defendants

Of the 205 defendants disposed of during October to December 2015, 60 (29%) pleaded guilty to all charges, compared with 175 (35%) during October to December 2014. In total 81% of defendants pleaded guilty or were found guilty of at least one offence between October to December 2015. Across the nine year time series, this percentage ranged between 81% and 86%.

3.6 Sitings

In total there were 609 Crown Court sittings for October to December 2015 compared with 702 for October to December 2014 (a decrease of 13%), with a total time of 1,339 hours sat compared with 1,923 hours sat during the same period last year.

APPENDIX 1

Table 1 - Crown Court cases received

	Total
Belfast	79
Londonderry	37
Antrim	51
Fermanagh and Tyrone	40
Armagh and South Down	43
Ards	51
Craigavon	44
Total	345

Table 2 - Crown Court cases disposed

	Total
Belfast	39
Londonderry	14
Antrim	31
Fermanagh and Tyrone	29
Armagh and South Down	18
Ards	16
Craigavon	18
Total	165

Table 3 - Crown Court defendants received

	Total
Belfast	92
Londonderry	56
Antrim	72
Fermanagh and Tyrone	44
Armagh and South Down	63
Ards	68
Craigavon	50
Total	445

Table 4 - Crown Court defendants disposed

	Total
Belfast	50
Londonderry	17
Antrim	34
Fermanagh and Tyrone	41
Armagh and South Down	25
Ards	17
Craigavon	21
Total	205

Table 5 - Waiting times in days

	Committal to hearing - days	Conviction to disposal - days	Total defendants disposed
Belfast	210	57	41
Londonderry	127	91	15
Antrim	196	61	31
Fermanagh and Tyrone	198	100	40
Armagh and South Down	128	93	23
Ards	153	142	16
Craigavon	145	119	21
Total	176	88	187

[1] Excludes defendants who had a bench warrant or deferred sentence

Table 6 - Crown Court defendants disposed by judge type

	Judicial Level		Total
	County Court Judge	High Court Judge	
Belfast	45	5	50
Londonderry	17	0	17
Antrim	34	0	34
Fermanagh and Tyrone	40	1	41
Armagh and South Down	25	0	25
Ards	17	0	17
Craigavon	21	0	21
Total	199	6	205

**Table 7 - Crown Court defendants disposed
by charge type**

All Offences Against the Person	41
All Sexual Offences	27
All Burglary Offences	8
All Robbery Offences	2
All Theft Offences	6
All Fraud and Forgery Offences	3
All Criminal Damage Offences	4
All Offences Against the State	3
All Other Offences	20
All Drug Offences	20
All Motoring Offences	5
All Non-Police Offences	1
Combination of charges	65
Total	205

Table 8 - Outcome of Crown Court Defendants

	Plea of guilty on all charges	Plea of not guilty on at least one charge - found guilty on at least one charge	Plea of not guilty - acquitted on all charges	All charges withdrawn	Total
Belfast	13	29	8	0	50
Londonderry	7	6	4	0	17
Antrim	11	18	5	0	34
Fermanagh and Tyrone	13	15	13	0	41
Armagh and South Down	5	19	1	0	25
Ards	6	9	2	0	17
Craigavon	5	11	5	0	21
Total	60	107	38	0	205

Table 9 - Crown Court sitting times

		Number of sittings	Total time
	Belfast	153	200:51
	Londonderry	50	124:49
	Antrim	91	196:36
	Fermanagh and Tyrone	93	275:52
	Armagh and South Down	114	337:42
	Ards	46	82:22
	Craigavon	62	120:33
Total		609	1338:45

APPENDIX 2 - EXPLANATORY NOTES

Acquittal

A judgement or verdict that a person is not guilty of the crime with which they have been charged

Arraignment

The procedure by which the defendant has criminal charges formally put to him before the judge at the Crown Court and he enters his plea of guilty

Committal

The procedure by which a person is returned for trial to the Crown Court by the magistrates' court, if the magistrates' court is satisfied that there is a case to answer.

County court judge

A judge who sits in the county court and the Crown Court.

Day sat

This is a day on which a judge sat to hear court business. The information is organised into the various types of court business that a judge hears. The judge's day may consist of one or more sittings, at one or more court venues.

Disposed

The date the case is finally dealt with via a court or non-court result and the case is no longer in the court process.

High Court Judge

A judge who sits in the High Court and the Crown Court to hear and determine civil, family, and criminal business.

Hybrid charge

This is also referred to as a 'triable-either-way' offence. A criminal offence that may be prosecuted either summarily (in the magistrates' court) or on indictment (in the Crown Court). In the majority of cases, the prosecution decides how the offence is tried depending on the seriousness of the offence.

Indictable charge

A serious criminal offence where the defendant is usually tried in the Crown Court.

Indictable triable summarily charge

A serious criminal offence where a defendant can be tried in the Crown Court but may in some instances be tried in a magistrates' court.

Justice & Security Act 2007

Legislation which replaced the Terrorism Act 2000 which makes provision for non-jury trials.

Plea

The response a defendant gives after criminal charges have been put to him e.g. "guilty" or "not guilty."

Scheduled

A scheduled offence is one which is listed in Schedule 9 of the Terrorism Act 2000 and which, if it is tried on indictment, will be heard by a judge sitting without a jury. This has been replaced by the Justice and Security Act 2007.

Sitting

This is a period of work by a judge in a single courtroom on a single day. Several types of business may be heard at one sitting. Business heard in different courtrooms, whether at the same venue or elsewhere, is counted as separate sittings.

Withdrawn

An order which removes a case from court, for a variety of reasons. The court action then ceases.

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